

## Shirley Geok-lin Lim: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Symbolism in a Selection of Poems

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### ABSTRACT

Because it leaves resonating statements that grab the reader's attention, symbolism is essential to literature. The reader may understand the poetry's subliminal meanings by grasping the meaning behind symbolism's figurative language. This research looks at how symbolism is used in a few poems by Shirley Lim, including *Feeling Sorry*, *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren*, *The Gate*, *The Rebel*, *My Father's Sadness*, and *Pantoun for Chinese Women*. Symbolism is a frequent figurative language in poetry. In order to better comprehend the ideologies driving the poetry, the latent meaning of the symbols expressions is analyzed utilizing a qualitative descriptive study approach and the three-dimensional model put forward by Fairclough (1995). Furthermore, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed by Fairclough is used in this work to explore the relationships between periphrastic texts, practices, and occurrences and more general social and cultural systems. The findings show that symbolism is often used, with 12 examples in the chosen poems explaining how symbolism is used to improve the meaning and presentation of the concepts of the social and cultural contexts. It is concluded that the poem's philosophy and underlying meaning—gender discrimination—are greatly influenced by the symbols. With regard to social and cultural systems, it is anticipated that this research will provide a more thorough understanding of the symbolism used in a number of Shirley Lim's poetry.

**Keywords:** *poetry, symbolism, figurative language, critical discourse analysis, Shirley Lim*

### INTRODUCTION

Literature consists of written works that combine intellectual content with artistic quality in order to employ language creatively, including the use of figurative language. It is a crucial element in poetry because it not only helps authors express their feelings and thoughts but also helps create a medium that allows readers to feel the intended meaning of the poems and freely imagine the setting based on the scenario of the poem. Consequently, the extensive use of figurative language allows for a more vivid expression of emotion as well as a greater degree of originality in one's interpretation of life events. This is because literary compositions are frequently influenced by the authors' experiences and surroundings throughout various periods of their lives, contributing to countless theories, histories, cultures, and traditions from ancient times to the present.

This study utilised the Critical Discourse Approach (CDA) to investigate the use of symbolism in the poetry of Shirley Lim, a Malaysian poet, in order to establish a connection between language

and social context. According to Rogers (2011), critical discourse analysis describes the context and explains the functions of discourse. According to Maharsi (2016), knowledge of literature aids in gaining a deeper understanding of literary theory and history, as well as provides insight into various cultures and traditions around the world. Research on poems typically focuses solely on the profound meaning of the poem. The symbolism in some of Shirley Lim's poems can therefore be examined using a critical discourse analysis to better understand how it is used and how it affects the meaning of her poems in their social context. Furthermore, studies on Malaysian literature collections are scarce. For instance, Muhammad Syaukat (2013) explored *The Poetry of A.Samad Said and Cecil Rajendra: A Comparative Study in Ecocriticism*. While Muhammad Amirudin (2015) investigated *The Effectiveness of Illustration in Conveying the Meaning of Usman Awang's Poems*, Gui (2021) looked into *Hyphenational poetics in Omar Musa's Parang and Millefiori*. Since Shirley Lim is an award-winning writer of fiction, poetry, and criticism, as well as a renowned scholar in the field of literature not only in Malaysia but also internationally, this research examined some of her poems, including *Feeling Sorry, A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren, The Gate, The Rebel, My Father's Sadness, and Pantoun for Chinese Women*. In addition, despite the fact that she was born in Malacca in 1944 and has lived abroad since 1969, her writing continues to be influenced by her home country. As a Malaysian Chinese and Asian-American, her writing demonstrates an intricate and ambivalent imagination, and many of her well-known poems, like *When, The Debt, and Reading*, are influenced by her childhood and life experiences (Quayum, 2003, 2014, 2019).

Most previous studies of Shirley Lim's poetry have focused on describing the themes and literary devices used in her poems. However, critical discourse analysis of the figurative language used in her poems is still scarce. For instance, Chin (2019) examined Shirley Lim's poetry's depiction of the father figure and the idea of filial piety in the poem *My Father's Daughter*. Furthermore, Ng (2007) emphasized the maternal imagination or figure in Shirley Lim's poetry. Thus, conducting a critical discourse analysis on symbolism is worthwhile in order to delve deeper into the symbolism used in her poems to depict the social context.

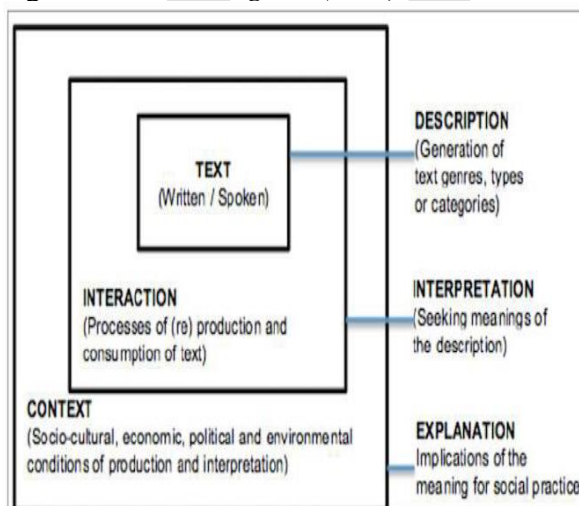
## LITERATURE REVIEW

Nordquist (2019) stated that figurative language is a discourse that uses figures of speech freely in contrast with literal language. Thus, figures of speech are normally used outside of formal contexts, such as in poetry, novels, prose, drama, and even daily life. In contrast to the literal dimension of language use, which employs words in their usual and obvious sense without any additional connotations, the figurative dimension is concerned with the suggestive or connotative use of language and, consequently, implies extended or associative meanings (Yeibo, 2012). Figuratively expressing meaning, the imaginative style of language therefore appeals to the emotions of the reader or listener. According to Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature (1995), figurative language in the European language is classified into five categories: figures of resemblance or relationship; figures of emphasis or understatement; figures of sound; verbal games and gymnastics; and errors. Literary devices like metonymy, metaphor, kenning, conceit, simile, personification, synecdoche, parallelism, euphemism, and symbolism are used to show similarities or connections. Due to the fact that symbolism is one of the figurative languages that is frequently

used in poetry as opposed to other literary genres, it was chosen for analysis in this study (Raisa et al., 2017). According to Nordquist (2019), symbolism is the practise of embedding things with significance so that they can represent something other than themselves. Additionally, symbolism is the use of words or images to represent particular ideas, characters, things, or events in order to make them come to life in the reader's mind. Symbolisms are prevalent in all cultures, societies, and norms. As an example of how it is used to convey information about a character, scene, or plot point, a black cat might stand in for a character's misfortune. A rose, for instance, is frequently used as a romantic or love symbol. As such, symbolism provides a clue as to the possible nature of the thing or person alluded to in the text. This eventually sparks readers' imaginations and helps them better understand the context by using symbolism to bridge the gap between the poem and the readers.

Language is a means of communication that is connected to the social construct. The way individuals perceive things is shaped by their life experiences, which are heavily influenced by the social context. According to Butler (2003), cited in Adekunle (2021), language is the primary means by which people communicate in social, cultural, and psychological settings that represent society as a whole. Fairclough (1995) affirms that language is essential to society. He asserts that the manner in which people use language in society is more of a social practise than an individual act. He then introduces a framework that discusses language, discourse, and society in order to better understand the relationship between language and social context. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) seeks to systematically investigate vague relationships between periphrastic practises, texts, and vast social and cultural events, structures, and processes (Al-Thamery, 2017). According to Fairclough (1995), CDA covers three main dimensions: text and the study of *texture*; *discourse practices* and the concept of *orders of discourse*; and sociocultural practices and the concept of *culture*. Fairclough (1995) developed three levels of critical discourse analysis to correspond with the three dimensions: text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation), and social analysis (explanation). Figure 1 depicts Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis.

Figure 1 Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis



## METHODOLOGY

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is one of several types of qualitative research analysis methods. It involves a theory of language as a form of social relations, and this type of analysis allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying meaning of a discourse, thereby interpreting the relationship between language and society (Hussein, 2021). Hence, the present research employs a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate the critical discourse analysis of symbolism in selected poems by Shirley Lim. In order to analyze the data, this research adopted the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough (1995). The first section, which is the textual analysis, focuses on identifying instances of symbolism in Shirley Lim's selected poems. The second section of this study, the processing analysis, investigates the implied meanings of the figurative language used in the chosen poems. Finally, the third section of this study's textual analysis seeks to investigate Shirley Lim's underlying ideology through the use of symbolism in her chosen poems.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the analysis of Shirley Lim's chosen poems; *Feeling Sorry*, *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren*, *The Gate*, *The Rebel*, *My Father's Sadness*, and *Pantoun for Chinese Women*, symbolism is evident throughout. Moreover, instances of symbolism are present in each poem, thereby fulfilling the objective of this study. Table 2 provides an overview of the frequency of symbolism in selected Shirley Lim poems. The data indicates that symbolism appears 12 times in the selected poems of Shirley Lim. It can be seen that symbolism is used more than once in each poem, with the exception of *The Rebel*, which has only one instance. *Feeling Sorry* (2), *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren* (3), *The Gate* (2), *My Father's Sadness* (2), and *Pantoun for Chinese Women* (2) all contain multiple instances of symbolism.

Table 1

Frequency of Symbolism in Shirley Lim's Selected Poems

Types of Figurative Language	Poems						TOTAL
	<i>Feeling Sorry</i>	<i>A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren</i>	<i>The Gate</i>	<i>The Rebel</i>	<i>My Father's Sadness</i>	<i>Pantoun for Chinese Women</i>	
Symbolism	2	3	1	2	2	2	12

### Textual Analysis of Symbolism

Symbolism is the use of words or images to represent specific concepts, figures, objects, or events that suggest a meaning other than their literal meaning in order to better connect the reader's imagination to perspective. Table 3 presents the total of 12 instances of symbolism found in the selected poems.

Table 2

## Instances of Symbolism in Shirley Lim's Selected Poems

Poems	Instances
Feeling Sorry	"So, must you mutter for the fallen forest..." "Must the young man with the revolver to be hanged tomorrow noon have a claim on us?"
A Woman Speaks for Grandchildren	"...to birds tumbling into the deadly arrogant ocean." "It's terrible to be seduced by filthy books with high
The Gate	thoughts..."
The Rebel	"But a little bird I'll never be." "...scorpions in a city night." "I will be reckless and roast opium balls over spirit lamps." "I will close my eyes in fox women harems..."
My Father's Sadness	"...so many men and women like dragons' teeth rising in the instance of his lifetime." "He is an oriental."
Pantoun for Chinese Women	"They say a child with two mouths is no good." "She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood,"

**Social Analysis of Symbolism**

As symbolism involves the act of representing ideas or concepts with greater meaning through the use of a person, situation, word, or object to represent another thing, it is essential to relate it to context. On the basis of Fairclough's CDA framework (1995), the social analysis of selected poems reveals that Shirley Lim's views on society are influenced by gender discrimination. According to Villiness (2021), gender discrimination is the practise of treating individuals differently based on their genders as opposed to their individual talents or qualities. In all environments, women have faced discrimination for centuries, including the present day. *The Rebel* depicts the discrimination of women in society, who are expected to behave modestly to demonstrate their femininity, in contrast to the reckless and defiant conduct of men. In addition, both *The Rebel* and *Pantoun for Chinese Women* depict males as superior, resulting in unfair and discriminatory treatment of female characters.

Moreover, *Pantoun for Chinese Women* represents the injustice of unborn female babies being killed because they are portrayed as a burden in ancient Chinese culture. This poem also depicts the ancient practise of killing newborn female infants, prevalent primarily in Chinese culture. Not only in Chinese culture, Cartwright (2016) shows that there has been discrimination against

women in Europe since the beginning of capitalism. There was a constant and violent attack on the sexual and productive autonomy of European women during this time, as hundreds of thousands of women were tortured and killed during witch hunts. This included women who lived in villages, worked as craftspeople, and had a strong sense of independence, as well as women healers and midwives. Other than that, *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren* also contains gender stereotypes in the form of implicit bias toward women, as the poem stresses the value of education while stereotyping women as natural caregivers for young children. Gender stereotypes exert pressure on individuals of both sexes to conform to unreasonably high standards, which harms society as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

There are many reasons why poetry needs symbolism. Encouraging the audience to effectively communicate the text's concepts is one of them. Furthermore, it enhances and intensifies the thoughts presented in the poetry. The link between the use of symbols in communicating the beliefs underpinning the poetry needs further research, even if many analyzes of poems have been done. As a consequence, a discourse analysis of Shirley Lim's chosen poems' usage of symbolism was carried out. Without a doubt, doing a critical discourse analysis requires a thorough awareness of the author's ideals and ideas in addition to a better understanding of the utilization of symbols. Consequently, Furlough's model of CDA has been used throughout this work to analyze the usage of symbols in a selection of poems by Shirley Geok-lin Lim. Based on the data analysis, the findings show that there are a total of 12 instances of symbolism in the six poems under examination. Furthermore, the elaboration of the figurative meaning of the terms used in the poems conforms to Fairclough's CDA, emphasizing how symbolism is employed to depict Shirley Lim's viewpoint on gender discrimination.

Seeing how context affects a symbol's perception and meaning is fascinating. Poetry is usually socially conscious, therefore when a person, place, term, or item is used to symbolize something else with a wider significance, readers are encouraged to connect with the poems' underlying meanings via creativity and the use of their imaginations. Since there is currently little research on the critical discourse analysis of symbolism in Shirley Lim's poems, linguists, students, and anyone else interested in learning more about Shirley Lim's poetry may all benefit from this study's insights and expertise. Furthermore, this study suggests that further research be done on other Malaysian poets or authors in the future to enhance awareness and comprehension of their writing style, beliefs, and points of view while also making their poetry more widely accessible.

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